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Chris Rock Has No Time for Your Ignorance

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Who's more racist: black people or white people? Black people. You know why? Because black people hate black people, too. Everything white people don't like about black people, black people don't like about black people. ... Every time black people want to have a good time, niggers mess it up. ... Can't keep a disco open more than three weeks. Grand opening? Grand closing. Can't go to a movie the first week it opens. Why? Because niggers are shooting at the screen. ... I know what all you black readers think. ... ''It isn't us, it's the media. The media has distorted our image to make us look bad.'' ... Please. ... When I go to the money machine at night, I'm not looking over my shoulder for the media. I'm looking for niggers. -- from ''Rock This!'' by Chris Rock

A Chris Rock concert is an exorcism by laughter. One of the first pure comedians to emerge in a generation, he makes us laugh not only because of perfect writing, skewed associations and rock-steady timing but also because of pain. The pain of how we've hurt ourselves with race, the pain of being a man, the pain of confusion. This is the flip side of the deep anger curdling the American dream; it is anger transformed into entertainment. Rock knows how far to go, like a crazed uncle who keeps tickling your toes while you beg for mercy.

Discovered by Eddie Murphy, Rock gained fame as a featured player on ''Saturday Night Live'' and ''In Living Color'' in the early 90's. He had a high-profile part in ''New Jack City'' and was a co-producer and star of ''CB4,'' but when ''In Living Color'' went off the air, Rock found himself without a job. So he returned to stand-up, working the clubs, honing his particular brand of streetwise humor. When his HBO comedy special, ''Bring the Pain,'' was broadcast last year -- with its defining routine ''Black People vs. Niggas'' -- it was clear that Rock, 31, was having a comeback.

Now he seems to be everywhere: in commercials for 1-800-Collect, on MTV and his HBO interview show, on a comedy album and in a new book, ''Rock This!'' Still, it is in concert that he is at his whip-cracking best. His influences range from Buster Keaton to Richard Pryor to Sam Kinison; he brings together a vast black and white audience to laugh at some of the most painful truths. In the end, Chris Rock is funny, and that's all that's important. Or is it?

Eric Bogosian: What's the difference between a black audience and a white audience?

Chris Rock: I'll give it to you in musical terms. When a musical act performs, the black audience goes crazy for all the stuff, the album cuts, everything. White audiences, they're nice and all, but they're not going to lose it until they get the hits. Comedy is the same thing.

Bogosian: How do you know when it is funny? When is the joke finished?

Rock: It's never locked. I mess with it every night. But I really don't improvise that much. I mean, 10 percent of the show is improvised.

Bogosian: What do you do when the audience doesn't get the good stuff?

Rock: I slow down my delivery. The natural thing to do when the show's not going well is to speed it up. Worst thing in the world. Slow it down. Make sure they understand everything you're saying. I'll think, Maybe the abortion bit won't play. But I don't drop that much stuff now.

Bogosian: Do you ever think you stink and they're eating it up?

Rock: I think that all the time. Out of a hundred shows I'll do in a year, I'll think maybe three are great.

Bogosian: Do you ever get angry at the people you work with because they tell you it's a great show and it's not?

Rock: They can't tell. My brothers, Andre and Tony, can tell, my producer, Nelson George, can tell, my sister can tell. Four people in the whole world can see people laughing and still say it's not a good show.

Bogosian: What about anger? You seem to move from mischievousness to malice to outright anger in your show. You talk about the anger of old black men and how they hide it.

Rock: When they're around white people they don't do anything. Then they get really angry when the white man walks away. ''Cracker!''

Bogosian: Young black people don't do that?

Rock: Old black men. These guys rode in the back of the bus. For a long time. And all that went with it. Hard to get rid of that. Someone like me, a lot younger, I didn't go through that.

Bogosian: I'm angry at everybody and I don't even need a reason. If I were black. ...

Rock: You're not.

Bogosian: No. But I get pulled over every time I get on an airplane. It's the ethnic hair, I think. But you seem angry at blacks, like you're resentful of your own kind. You pick on black behavior a lot.

Rock: I pick on ignorance. Anyone who thinks it's cool to be stupid.

Bogosian: There are blacks you are clearly angry at. You used the word ''nigger'' in your HBO show.

Rock: I guess I did.

Bogosian: Your audience is made up of whites, many of whom are happy to hear how lazy or stupid blacks are. You're using the word ''nigger.'' And some of the white audience is saying, ''That's right.''

Rock: Every ethnic group divides itself, criticizes itself. I know gay guys who say ''fag.'' What I said got more attention because it was black people, and we tend to get more attention when we do things.

Bogosian: ''Nigger'' is a heavy-duty word. You better have a good reason for using it.

Rock: It's not that heavy-duty. The thing with ''nigger'' is just that white people are ticked-off because there's something they can't do. That's all it is. ''I'm white, I can do anything in the world. But I can't say that word.'' It's the only thing in the whole world that the average white man cannot use at his discretion.

Bogosian: Your work is full of incisive criticism about the way people act. Is it important to get a message across? Or is it a kind of a cloak you're wearing because it's cool to say loaded stuff?

Rock: Really, really at the end of the day, the only important thing is being funny. I don't go out of my way to be political. My dad drove a newspaper truck. I just read the paper every day as a kid. I was bused to school. My [expletive] was kicked by white kids and I was called ''nigger.'' So I have a point of view. But the most important thing is to be funny.

Bogosian: Paul Reiser is a funny guy and Paul Reiser talks about relationships and it's very funny and it's very sweet and nice. You, on the other hand, are like Loki, you're like the Norse god of mischief who's coming in with that glint in your eye. You talk about Don Rickles a lot.

Rock: Oh, no -- no one's better. No one does a better TV appearance, no one sits down and does a couch better than Rickles.

Bogosian: Yeah, but I remember when Don Rickles broke -- that's how old I am. He used to do all these put-downs, and he looked like he meant it. That was the big thing in the early 60's -- sick comics. You talk about the organ donors who come back from the dead and they don't have any eyes. That's dark. You go after heroes of the black community. Marion Barry, O.J. Simpson. ...

Rock: Hero? O.J.'s picture is not hanging up in my grandmother's kitchen.

Bogosian: Is there such a thing as a black community, really? A welfare mother in Brownsville, a Nigerian selling watches on Fifth Avenue, an upper-middle-class Atlanta suburbanite, a nanny from Jamaica -- what do these people have in common other than skin?

Rock: If it all goes wrong with each one of these people, they'd end up living in the exact same neighborhood. That's reality.

Bogosian: But, I mean, I can't say I belong to the white community. There are plenty of white people who do not for a second include me in their community.

Rock: Automatically you're a community because you're the majority. I mean, it's like your house: you don't have a room in your house, it's your house. You know what I mean? Yes, there is a black community, and we have a room in the white community's house.

Bogosian: In this community the message from celebrities in music, on talk shows and in movies seems mixed. There's a lot of talk about family, about God, but there's also a glorification of the street, ''gangsta'' life style. Isn't that kind of schizoid?

Rock: It's about wanting to be accepted where you're from.

Bogosian: But it's like what the racists were saying in the first place -- ''Every young black man is a thug'' has become a cool idea. It's being promoted.

Rock: It's about acceptance at home. I'm always thinking, What happens if I had to go home, had to move back to Bed-Stuy? I'd want to be accepted. People think you're gonna flip out and come all show business and not talk to 'em. People get

the big entourage and all and isolate themselves.

Bogosian: You might want that some day. Wasn't your grandfather a preacher?

Rock: My grandfather, who actually just passed, was a preacher. I would watch him and I would listen to stuff: Dr. King, you know, Malcolm X, Kennedy. 'Cause I just looked at it as kind of the same thing as I was trying to do, but without punch lines. I think anybody in front of a crowd is a comedian.

Bogosian: Is there a different kind of intelligence needed for comedy?

Rock: I'm not a smart guy. I dropped out of high school, I've read 10, 11 books in my life. ...

Bogosian: But that isn't what smart is.

Rock: Smart's knowing if you're dumb. Knowing when to shut up and to listen to people that are smarter than you. Put it this way, the inability to get a joke is the first sign of ignorance. Like when you tell a joke about a guy and he gets mad at you? That's a dumb guy.

Bogosian: Adolf Hitler had no sense of humor. Newt Gingrich. Humorless.

Rock: In show business, comedians are the smartest guys.

Bogosian: Well, you know what, Chris, you and I are like in parallel universes, and there's a lot of similarities ----.

Rock: No, I've watched your stuff, I'm not -- I do what a lot of the old white musicians did and watched all the black guys. I watch everybody's stuff, man.

Bogosian: Well, what I do is push people's buttons or get people shocked. And then I got some reviews a few years ago saying I wasn't shocking enough. So now, here's the new nasty kid with this razor-blade intellect ----.

Rock: Me? Razor-blade intellect? I had a 14 in math one time.

Bogosian: That's O.K. Look, I had seven study halls a day when I was in high school.

Rock: Fourteen, man. My mother laughed at the grade. If it was, like, in the middle of the 50's, she would have got mad. Fourteen was, like, this is hysterical.

Bogosian: Is there such a thing as a dumb successful comedian?

Rock: Well, yeah. They're not dumb, they're like Amadeus. Savants.

Bogosian: Like Gilbert Gottfried?

Rock: No, Gilbert's brilliant. I won't name names, but there's some guys, very successful. And you can overcome a lot of handicaps if you're willing to bust your [expletive].

Bogosian: You like to work really hard.

Rock: It's like boxing -- if you don't train, you're going to get the [expletive] kicked out of you. It's not like, you know, if you hang out in basketball, ''Oh, he had a bad game, mmm, he was off that night.'' Boxing, you get the [expletive] kicked out of you and you might not get another shot the rest of your life, that's how boxing is.

You know, the only bad thing about stand-up is that in order to work it out, you have to go back all the way to where you started. There's no other way to get good at it. It's like if Schwarzenegger before he does a movie has to go do a competition lifting weights. So I got to go, you know, to the Boston Comedy Club in the middle of the night. It's not, I will do it. I've got to do it. Or else I'm going to get the [expletive] kicked out of me.

Bogosian: So there's, like, this hair-shirt discipline to what you do.

Rock: I like to work at the latest possible hour and just try to get one of the worst possible circumstances. I like to work in front of all-white audiences to start it off, even with the blackest material. Because I know once I get this black joke to work, when I get it in front of a bunch of black people, it's really going to kill. It's kind of like a baseball player swinging two bats on the on-deck circle. I want to work in front of people who would never pay to see me.

Bogosian: What if everything were going the way that you liked -- if all the movies and TV shows had been hits?

Rock: I'd be the worst guy. I wouldn't be funny at all. No, when I was on ''Saturday Night Live'' I was the worst guy. I loved women I had no business being with. She had to look so good that people would go, ''Why's she [expletive] him?'' And guys would want to fight me. I didn't know how to handle any money. I made 90 grand my first year, so I bought a $40,000 car. Kind of stupid.

Bogosian: But no drugs.

Rock: Nah. I might as well have been drugged, though.

Bogosian: So what's next?

Rock: I'd like to write and direct a movie for myself. Now that I've achieved my greatest success just doing stand-up comedy, which is, like, the lowest medium in all of show business in levels of respect, I want to really take chances. I want to be funny in a lot of different ways. You know, I'd like to be great. I want to reach for greatness.

Bogosian: Is it going to happen in a movie?

Rock: No, it can happen in concert. Richard Pryor did his best work in concert.

Bogosian: Everybody says that Richard Pryor is the big influence.

Rock: Yeah, and that's the best-written comedy you've ever seen. Most every comedian probably, except for Woody, did his best work as a stand-up. And Woody was a great stand-up. Cosby's got the biggest show in the world, whatever, but his best work was stand-up. I mean, you can achieve greatness in comedy, you just have to realize that the critical masses just don't view comedy as great. I think Eddie Murphy should have gotten nominated for an Oscar for ''Nutty Professor,'' just on the performance.

Bogosian: You're not the first person to say that.

Rock: He played five or six people -- incredible, incredible, incredible. If he did that in a movie that had something to do with death or AIDS or something, he'd get nominated in a second.

Bogosian: So the millions are piling up. When will you be buying your Malibu cottage?

Rock: I live in Brooklyn and actually like living in Brooklyn. It's different between New York and L.A. People in New York are proud of what they do, no matter what the hell they do. In L.A., it's just a routine. No one's proud, everybody's like: ''This is what I'm doing now. Yeah, no, I'm a doctor, but I'm just doing that right now. I wrote a script, and me and the other physicians are shopping around.'' Everybody wants to be in show business.

New York's the best place in the world. You know what I love? It's like the garbage men will have a dance, and they'll rent out a big place, and it's cool. My brother Andre drives a truck. In L.A. you wouldn't want to say you drive a truck probably. My brother Andre is, like, the most proud truck driver you ever met in your life. He walks in a room and goes: ''See that coffee cup right there? A truck bought it to you. Everything in here. People talk about computers going to change everything. Hey! You got to get the computer. Who's going to get it to you? Me. The guy with the truck.''

Bogosian: Is this a routine or ----.

Rock: No. It's just my brother Andre.

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